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TAGS: KFLU TBIO SENV PGOV CASC IN

SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA IN WEST BENGAL: SITREP 3 - JANUARY 16, 2008

REF: KOLKATA 11, KOLKATA 14

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: January 16, the first day of poultry culling operations launched at Margram and Balurghat in West Bengal following the outbreak of H5N1 virus, was marked by confusion. Contacts told post that villagers were not cooperative and that some poultry was smuggled out of the affected areas. The Response Teams appear to be well equipped, but are hampered by the informal nature of many poultry farms in the area. Authorities plan to cull approximately 350,000 birds. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On January 16, the Animal Resource Department (ARD) of GOWB started culling operations in Birbhum and South Dinajpur district following confirmation of the presence of H5N1 virus in the dead birds from the area (reftels). The total number of birds slated for culling is now close to 350,000. Fifty-five Rapid Response Teams (RRT) from ARD - each with five members - have fanned out over 105 villages in Margram I and Margram II administrative blocks. Contacts observing the culling operation in Margram told Post that ARD personnel had adequate protective gear including masks, aprons and gloves. The health department has also brought stocks of Tamiflu to the area.

¶3. (U) However, villagers have been reluctant to cooperate with the authorities. Although it is difficult to estimate exact numbers, a significant quantity of poultry reportedly has already been smuggled out of the affected areas. This is despite the GOWB announcing a compensation of USD 1.10 per full grown chicken and USD 0.80 for chicks, and actually sending USD 270,000 to Margram and USD 65,000 to Balurghat in cash for the payouts. RRTs were able to round up small batches of 20 to 25 birds. Although the government is watching the highways and major village roads to prevent the movement of poultry, people were moving around with little difficulty. Later in the day, the district administration did impose movement restrictions along highways and village roads.

¶4. (U) The ARD director admitted that there have been difficulties in the culling operations. Backyard poultry farms are the majority of operations affected in Margram, and the RRTs have to visit each and every household in the villages. This has made the Margram mop-up operations more complicated than Balurghat, where the affected area only includes the state poultry farm. The ARD department has excavated several pits to bury the culled birds.

¶5. (U) GOWB health officials have started monitoring about 275,000 people who are living in the affected areas. So far no one has reported flu-like symptoms. Isolation wards have been established at Basoa health center (in Margram) and at Rampurhat Sub-divisional Hospital.

¶6. (U) COMMENT: The first day of culling operations at Margram have been marked by confusion. There are reports of a lack of coordination between different agencies responding to the outbreak. On the basis of feedback from contacts, it appears that the authorities were unable to convince community leaders of the seriousness of the outbreak, and could not get them to instruct villagers to help in culling operations. News of the AI outbreak seems to have had an effect in Kolkata, where reports indicate that poultry sales have declined.

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